

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2015*

**Remarks at a SheKnows Media/BlogHer Town Hall Meeting and a Question-and-Answer Session on Working Families in Charlotte, North Carolina**

*April 15, 2015*

*The President.* Hello, everybody! Thank you! Everybody, please have a seat. Thank you so much. Well, this is fun. [*Laughter*] I was just hanging out with the Cat in the Hat that's in the back there. [*Laughter*] Hello, everybody.

*Audience member.* Hello!

*The President.* Hello! [*Laughter*] Let me start by acknowledging two of North Carolina's champions in Congress who flew down with me. Alma Adams is here. Give her a big round of applause. There she is. And David Price—where's David? And your own outstanding mayor, Dan Clodfelter, is here. Where's Dan? Right—[*applause*].

I want to thank Dianna for the introduction. I'm actually here because Dianna sent me a letter, and I wanted to reply in person. [*Laughter*] And I want to thank Lisa and everybody who helped put this together.

Let me just read an excerpt of what Dianna wrote me: "As part of the middle class, I know how it feels to work hard every day and, even with a college education and a full-time job, find it harder and harder to make ends meet." Now, I think it's fair to say that what Dianna said is true for so many people here in North Carolina and all across the country.

It's the kind of letter that I would get all the time from folks who ask for one thing: that in America, their hard work and their sense of responsibility is rewarded with the chance to get ahead. And I know it's on the minds of working moms every day.

[*At this point, a baby cried.*]

*The President.* Yes it is, and you too. [*Laughter*]

[*The baby cried again.*]

*The President.* There, yes, I know. [*Laughter*]

And because a lot of working moms use BlogHer and SheKnows to talk about these issues, we've decided to partner with them for this town hall. So I'm going to keep my remarks brief at the front end so we can spend most of the time having a conversation.

Now, thanks in part to some of the decisions that we made early on in the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression—right when I came into office—we've made real progress. Our businesses have created more than 12 million new jobs over the past 5 years. The unemployment rate has fallen from 10 percent right when I was coming into office to 5.5 percent.

More kids are graduating from high school. More kids are attending college. More people are able to save more money at the pump because our energy production has gone up. Our clean energy production has gone up. More Americans know the security of health care because of this thing called the Affordable Care Act, a.k.a. Obamacare.

And so the recovery reaches more Americans every single day. And the question we now face is, are we going to accept an economy in which, going forward, just a few folks are doing

exceptionally well, or are we going to have an economy where everybody who's willing to work hard is able to get ahead?

And that's what I've been calling middle class economics. The idea that in this country, we do best when everybody is getting a fair shot and everybody is doing their fair share and everybody is playing by the same set of rules. And that's what has driven my policies ever since I became President. A lot of my policies have been specifically focused on working moms, because I believe that when women succeed here in America, then the whole country succeeds. I'm a firm believer in that.

Now, part of middle class economics means helping working families feel more economically secure in this global, technologically driven, constantly changing economy. Which is why my budget puts forward proposals to lower the taxes for working families who are trying to pay for things like childcare and college and retirement.

In today's economy, having both parents in the workforce is an economic reality for many families. But in 31 States, including North Carolina, high-quality childcare costs are higher than a year of tuition at a State university. Average cost here in North Carolina, \$16,000 for childcare. And that's why my plan would make it much more affordable for every working and middle class family with young children.

In today's economy, higher education has never been more important or more expensive. And that's why I want to bring down the cost of community college for responsible students—all the way down to zero—so that they know that if they are doing well in high school, they can get that higher education they need for a job.

In today's economy, women still hold most of the low-paying jobs, jobs that often demand the hardest work. And that's why we've successfully worked with States and cities and companies to raise their workers' wages without having to wait for Congress, which, although Alma and David Price are on board on this, for some reason we've got a whole bunch of Members of Congress who don't get it when it comes to raising wages. And I know there are workers here in Charlotte and across the country that are organizing for higher wages. It's time that we stood alongside them and made it happen. America deserves a raise.

Now, it is significant that today is tax day. *[Laughter]* If you haven't filed, you—*[laughter]*. But the reason I mentioned all the policies that I just talked about is that overall, when you put my policies together in the budget, I want to cut taxes for more than 5 million middle class families who need help paying for childcare. I want to cut taxes for more than 8 million families of students who need help paying for college. I want to cut taxes to help 30 million workers save for retirement. I want to cut taxes for 13 million low-wage workers the same way that I've fought to expand tax cuts like the child tax credit and the earned income tax credit, and we've been able to implement those.

So all told, my plan would cut taxes for 44 million working and middle class families. And that's who our Tax Code should benefit: working Americans who are out there struggling every day, doing the right thing, supporting their families, and trying to get a leg up in this new economy.

Now, it is a good thing that Republicans in Washington have started to talk about wages and incomes and the middle class. It's better late than never—*[laughter]*—and so I'm encouraged. Unfortunately, the policies they're putting forward don't answer the mail; they don't speak to the issues that ordinary families are facing.

So I'll just give you a couple examples. Their tax plan would give the average millionaire and billionaire a \$50,000 tax cut. That's about what the average middle class worker makes in an entire year. They're also pushing a new \$270 billion tax cut for the very wealthiest of the wealthiest. It would affect about 5,000 families—[*laughter*]—all across America; it would cost \$270 billion. Here in North Carolina, it would benefit precisely 120 households.

*Audience members.* Boo!

*The President.* For \$270 billion, which is the cost approximately of the tax breaks I'm giving to 44 million people, it would benefit a little over 5,000 people.

So their plan would cut taxes for the top one-tenth of 1 percent and let taxes go up on 25 million working families and students. And my view is, we don't need tax cuts for millionaires and billionaires. I don't need a tax cut. We're already doing well. We've been blessed by this country and the opportunities it offers, and now what we have to focus on is making sure everybody has opportunity and making sure middle class families have tax cuts and a young family that just had their first child and are still struggling to get by, that they get a little bit of relief, a little bit of a break. Those are the folks who need help. That's what middle class economics is all about, and that's what I'm going to be fighting for.

But I'm going to stop talking because I promised I would be short. [*Laughter*] And one of the things that I'm going to want to do is not just do the talking but I also want to do some listening. And what I'm really interested in is hearing from all of you about what are you facing in your lives. How do you think government policy would be helpful? What do you think folks in Congress, the President, mayors, Governors, what do you think would actually make a difference in the lives of middle class families? And because we've got some powerful, hard-working women around here, I also want to specifically hear from the women in terms of what you think would make a difference as well. All right?

So with that, let me—I'm going to take my seat right here. [*Laughter*]

### *Wage Equality*

*BlogHer Cofounder and SheKnows Chief Community Officer Lisa Stone.* Thank you, Mr. President. I think this is on. I'm going to be selfish and kick off with the first question. But then, we are going to hand over a few questions to you all. And when the time comes for you, just raise your hand and a mike wrangler will magically appear and hold it for you.

I'd like to cover off on something that happened yesterday: Equal Pay Day in the United States. The Paycheck Fairness Act has failed, I believe, now four times in Congress. I know you've been a proponent of it. I heard from a user of sheknows.com yesterday, Lily Onate. She works 1½ jobs to be the single supporter of her son. She's making just enough that she cannot afford to get sick, but she also cannot achieve certain benefits. She's trying to save for college. And more than anything, she is very disappointed to learn she is making less than men 10 years younger than she is on the job. Women make 78 cents on the dollar unless they're women of color, in which they make significantly less.

Why is the Paycheck Fairness Act failing? And does someone dispute the existence of the pay difference?

*The President.* The reason we haven't gotten it done is because Republicans in Congress have blocked it. And some of them do dispute that it's a problem. I mean, many say it's a woman's choice that is resulting in women getting paid less than men: lifestyle decisions; and they'd rather stay at home; or they'd rather work part time; or what have you.

Now, understand that the whole point of equal pay is people doing the same job and getting paid less. That's the problem. The Paycheck Fairness Act would say not that women should get paid more or the same if they're doing less work, it's saying they should get paid the same for doing the same work.

Now, this should be a no-brainer. There are some things that are conceptually complicated. *[Laughter]* There are other things that are pretty simple. If you've got two people doing the same job, they should get paid the same.

And this is personal for me, because I think a lot of people are aware, I was raised by a single mom who worked, went to school, got her advanced degree, and helped raise me and my sister. And we also got help from my grandparents, and actually, the main breadwinner in our entire family was my grandmother. And she's a great story. Grew up in a—in Kansas. My grandfather went to fight in World War II in Europe. When he came back, he got benefits of the GI bill, but she was Rosie the Riveter. She was working back home on an assembly line. And she didn't get, unfortunately, benefits the way we set up the post-9/11 GI bill, where spouses and family members can get help as well.

So she never got a college education. But she was smarter than my grandfather. I apologize, Gramps—*[laughter]*—but I think everybody who knew her understood that. She got a job as a secretary, worked her way up, became the vice president of a bank, but then hit the glass ceiling and, for the next 20 years, kept on training younger men who came up and would end up going ahead of her, including the presidents of the banks.

And that was pretty typical at that time. The question is, why is it still typical now? I've got two daughters. I expect them to be treated the same as somebody else's sons when it comes to their opportunities on the job.

So what we did when I came into office, we passed something called the Lilly Ledbetter Act, named after a good friend of mine, Lilly Ledbetter, who had worked for years and found out long into her work that she had been getting paid all these years less than men, substantially. She brought suit. They said, well, it's too late to file suit because you should have filed suit right when it started happening. She said, I just found out. And they said, it doesn't matter. *[Laughter]* So we changed that law to allow somebody like Lilly, when they find out, to finally be able to go ahead and file suit.

What we also did then is, I signed what's called an Executive order that said if you want to be a Federal contractor with us, then you've got to allow your employees to share compensation data. Because a lot of companies discourage or even penalize employees for telling each other what they're getting paid, in part because they don't want everybody finding out that maybe the men are getting paid more than the women for doing the same job. So we said, you want to work for the Federal Government, you can't do that.

But we still need to get this Paycheck Fairness Act passed. And it really is just a matter of convincing a number of Republicans to recognize that they've got daughters too, they've got spouses, and at a time when the majority of families have both spouses working, or if you've got a single parent—that's most likely to be a single mom—working, this is an economic issue. It's a family issue. It's not just a women's issue. Families are going to be better off.

Let me tell you, now, Michelle would point out, First Ladies get paid nothing. *[Laughter]* So there's clearly not equal pay in the White House when it comes to her and me. But before we were in the White House, I wanted to make sure Michelle got paid as much as she could. *[Laughter]* I want a big check—paycheck for Michelle. *[Laughter]* That wasn't a women's

issue. If she had a bigger paycheck, that made us able to pay the bills. Why would I want my spouse or my daughter discriminated against? That doesn't make any sense.

So this should be a no-brainer. And hopefully, we'll—we're just going to keep on pushing until the light bulb goes off on—above the heads of some of these Republican friends of mine.

*Ms. Stone.* Well, I'd like to see some hands from people in the audience who are interested in asking a question.

*The President.* Go ahead.

*Ms. Stone.* Please stand up. Yes.

*Q.* Hi, Mr. President.

*The President.* I think we can hear you.

*Q.* Okay.

*The President.* Are you guys hearing that back here? No? Uh-oh. *[Laughter]* Testing, one, two, three.

*Ms. Stone.* Why don't we work on that mike, and we'll—

*The President.* Well, hold on a second. No, I mean, she—this stretches. *[Laughter]* I'll be like Phil Donahue. *[Laughter]*

### *Education Funding/Teachers*

*Q.* Hi, Mr. President. I'm Erin Odom from Worzel, North Carolina, and thehumbledhomemaker.com. It's an honor to meet you. My question is—first of all, I believe that the key to economic growth and the key to ending the cycle of poverty is education, which I think you would agree. My question is: What can the Government do on a Federal level to increase the wages of our teachers, which is traditionally and stereotypically a female profession?

Now, I'll tell you, my husband is a public school teacher. I'm a blogger. Through our business—we call it our business because he helps me—we make significantly more money on a mommy blog than he makes as a public school teacher. For 3 years, we were on Government aid, and I'm thankful we had that so that we could survive through our WIC checks, through Medicaid. But there are teachers that are leaving the professions—good teachers—because they can't afford to feed their families. And I want the children in our country to have a good education. And females—my husband is a male, but females that are single women supporting their families on a teacher's salary, they can't do it. So I know it's a State thing, but what can the Federal Government do to put pressure on the States to increase teacher income?

*The President.* Well, first of all, do you guys have kids?

*Q.* Yes, sir. We have three daughters—2, 4, and 6.

*The President.* Oh, you're busy—*[laughter]*—2, 4, and 6. Do you bring them here to the—this is pretty nice. I was saying it before I came out here, I loved those days when Malia and Sasha were that age, and I could come hang out at these places. Plus, you could go to all the movies like "Monsters, Inc." and stuff—*[laughter]*. And I love those movies—"Toy Story." And people didn't think you were weird watching them because you had two little kids. *[Laughter]*

Your point about teachers is absolutely right. And you're also right that, historically, this has been a State issue. Schools are generally funded through the State and typically through

property taxes. And the Federal Government's total education budget accounts for about 7 percent of total education spending.

And one of the things that we think is really important is making sure that the Federal Government, in providing assistance to school districts, encourages States to do their fair share as well. And in fact, there was a debate that was taking place because the House Republicans were talking about changing the formula where Federal State aid was provided so that it would be okay to take Federal aid and then reduce the amount of State dollars that were going to education and pay for tax cuts for somebody else, and then teachers would be no better off.

But I'll be honest with you, the primary way that we can have an impact at the Federal level is to point out States that are doing better and States that are doing worse and to talk about the importance of teachers in our economic growth and our society.

My sister was a teacher, and so I know how little she got paid. It's hard to support a family. And there are a lot of young people who are really talented who want to go into teaching. In places like Korea and Finland, where the education system is really doing well, teachers are paid at the level that doctors and engineers are paid, and it is respected as a profession.

So frankly, we've just got to put more pressure on States, because there aren't that many levers that we have in order to encourage States to change their pay structure.

Now, I'm just going to editorialize a little bit. Here in North Carolina, this used to be the State in which the promise of education was understood at the State government level, and the reason North Carolina did better economically than many of the other Mid-Atlantic and Southern States was because of the Research Triangle and the emphasis on education, and my good friend Jim Hunt, the Governor, who used to place such a big emphasis on it.

Funding now here in the State and teacher pay is ranking as low as it gets. And so part of it is just pointing that out and, hopefully, understanding, this shouldn't be a partisan issue. It shouldn't matter whether you're a Republican or Democrat; you should want to make sure that schools are successful. And that requires teachers that are motivated, have professional training, but are also making enough of a living that they can afford a middle class lifestyle.

### *Early Childhood Education*

*Ms. Stone.* Picking up on that, Erin mentioned that she has 2-, 4-, and 6-year-olds. We surveyed 57 different moms here in the North Carolina—Charlotte Greater Area. And their primary concern was family-friendly policies. They feel that they are particularly struggling with early childhood. We had a question online from @FeministaJones, who said, the U.S. is behind; other countries have been successful in developing paid maternity leave, in some cases, paternity leave. We are not investing in the first 5 years of childhood to the same tune as some of our international economic competitors. What is the solution for that?

*The President.* The solution is for us to expand access to early childhood education.

Here's what we know. We know this is the smartest investment we can make as a society. Every dollar we put in—into high-quality early childhood education, we get \$7 back in reduced teen pregnancy, improved graduation rates, improved performance in school, reduced incarceration rates. The society as a whole does better.

And this is not just a problem for the poorest of the poor, although that obviously is a very important factor, because you've got a lot of single moms out there. If we want to get them into the workforce, they've got to feel like there's some reliable childcare. But we also want to make

that childcare high quality so that those kids now start having ladders of opportunity that are available to them. But it's also—this is a middle class—this is an American issue.

Look, when Michelle and I, when our daughters were 5, 6, or younger, one of the biggest challenges we had was finding good childcare and being able to afford childcare. At a time when we were still paying off debts from our student loans, we're trying to buy a house for the first time, juggling all those things was tough. And we were making a lot more money than a lot of people do. So I know if it was hard for us, I can only imagine what it's like for somebody who's making \$40,000, \$50,000 a year, or less.

And the good news is that at the State level, we've actually seen some recognition of this issue. I'm really encouraged by the fact that it's not just the traditional States you'd expect, but also a lot of so-called red States where the Governors, Republican Governors, have said, you know what, this is important. Oklahoma has got outstanding early childhood initiatives going.

[*The President sneezed.*]

*The President.* Excuse me.

*Ms. Stone.* Bless you.

*The President.* Thank you. I was fighting that one for a while.

Georgia is doing some excellent work around early childhood. So what we've been doing is actually providing some early childhood education grants through the Department of Education to try to help put together public-private partnerships, to get State and Federal money so that we can develop models of outstanding early childhood education and show what a difference it can make. And it can make a huge difference in terms of long-term performance.

We know, for example, that a very poor child, when they show up at kindergarten, they're already behind millions of words. They've just heard so much less vocabulary that there's a gap that needs to be closed. But we also know that if there's a high-quality early childhood education program, particularly ones that are working with the parents, then even a parent who didn't graduate from high school, if they're talking to their child, and they're getting support, and the child is at a high-quality early childhood level, that gap can close pretty quickly. Because kids are resilient, and they'll soak up like a sponge what they're getting.

So we're—what we're trying to do is put together coalitions at the State levels and city levels, and our hope is, is that by showing that this can work in a variety of places, that eventually, Congress catches up and recognizes, this is a competitive issue for us globally as well.

In France, the early childhood programs are so good that everybody, the wealthiest as well as the poorest, all send their kids to these early childhood education programs. And the teachers there aren't just babysitters; they are professionally trained in early childhood development. And it really pays off. It's a great way for us to make sure every child gets opportunity in this country and to relieve some pressure from parents who have to work.

*Ms. Stone.* Thank you.

Other questions? I want to make sure we're—yes, ma'am. In the red.

*The President.* Hold on. Let's get a mike so we can hear you.

*Childcare Tax Credit/Federal Budget Deficit/Tax Reform*

Q. Hi, my name is Collette Forest, and I'm a single parent here in Charlotte, North Carolina. I used to receive a childcare voucher, so I know how important it is. But when the republicanly controlled legislature took over, we lost it. And a lot of fellow sisters that are with me, we had to make choices whether or not to pay for before-school care or afterschool care, because we had to work and we needed it. How can you help us?

*The President.* Well, now, this was not a plant, but it so happens—[laughter]—that we're actually proposing as part of my budget package to triple the child credit, which would translate to potentially an additional \$900 a year for childcare. And that's going to make a big difference in a lot of families.

So at the Federal level at least, this should be one of our top budget priorities. And it is in everybody's interest to make sure that our kids—and I say "our" because the one thing I really believe is that even if you're single, even if your kids are grown, even if your kids are like mine, on their way to college soon and think I'm boring and don't want to hang out with me as much as they used to—[laughter]—that your kid is important to me too. And that's not out of charity, that's because your child—is it a son or a daughter?

Q. Eight-year-old son.

*The President.* An 8-year-old son. Your son, if he is doing well, that means he is paying taxes. That means he is contributing to society, he's staying out of trouble. That's a good investment for me. So we want to make sure that those families who are working hard, doing the right thing, that they get some tax relief. And we can afford this. The one thing I want to emphasize—because sometimes, when we talk about things like early childhood, people say, well, that'd be nice, but we can't afford it. Well, the truth is, is if we closed a few corporate tax loopholes that are not contributing to the economy right now, then we could afford it without increasing the deficit.

And I want to make this point, even though it's a little off topic, but it oftentimes is the backdrop against which these debates take place. If you listen to some of my political critics, they always want to paint me or the Democratic Party as this "tax and spend" and irresponsible. Let me say this: Since I came into office, the Federal deficit has come down by two-thirds. It hasn't gone up. It's come down by two-thirds. So when Bill Clinton was President, budget got balanced, and we had low deficits. Then, somebody else came in and—[laughter]—deficits started going up. And then, I came in, and I inherited this huge recession that drove up the deficits. And then, we started whittling them down, even as we were expanding the earned-income tax credit, even as we were expanding Pell grants. Because part of what we did was we said, well, let's make sure the Tax Code is fair. Let's make sure that we're eliminating programs that don't work to help middle class families.

There are ways to afford in our budget what needs to be done to help middle class families without blowing up the deficit. But it does require us making up—some choices, which is why when I hear a proposal from the House Republicans to reduce what we call the trust fund loophole so that the top one-tenth of 1 percent are getting a tax break—literally, fewer than 6,000 families benefit from this, because right now the way it works is you don't even pay this tax until you already have \$5.5 million or \$11 million for a couple. And we're going to give those folks a tax break for \$270 billion. And all that money we could be spending, we could provide tax credits for childcare or for high—kids wanting to go to college. It—you've got to have some priorities here.



It turns out that as President, you end up knowing a lot of people, including a lot of rich people. Some of them are big supporters of mine, good friends of mine. Warren Buffett is a great friend of mine. Warren Buffett doesn't need a tax break. [Laughter] He really doesn't. He has too much money to spend. He can't spend it all. Even with all the money he's giving away, he still can't spend it all. So why would we be giving him a tax break when there are a whole bunch of families who need help?

And this is something that we really have to focus on. And as I said, it shouldn't even be a partisan issue. It's just a matter of common sense and fairness.

*Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Education/Women in the Technology Industry/Minimum Wage/Paid Sick Leave*

Ms. Stone. Mr. President, you were just talking about some of the Nation's leading wealthy and also a little bit of corporate responsibility. I want to ask you about the private enterprise and their role.

I am visiting beautiful North Carolina today from Silicon Valley, where for the past year, unfortunately, it seems the Valley has become a poster child for the challenges women are having penetrating the leadership of some of our best technology companies. Women are lacking in venture capital firms. We're not running as many companies. We're not in the leadership pipeline. We're not in the engineering product groups in the same number. In fact, we are not getting as many STEM-related majors as we used to.

So when I think about some of the responsibilities you're saying the Government has, I would ask you what is the economic risk, either in Silicon Valley or here in the entire American economy, competitively, to having fewer women empowered in both leadership positions at home and in corporate America? What are we giving up in the economy? Product benefits? Insight?

The President. Well, let me use a sports analogy since I'm in North Carolina. There's some pretty good basketball here in North Carolina.

Ms. Stone. And perhaps, sir, I'm off base.

The President. No—oh, did everybody catch that—off base? [Laughter] You guys—[laughter]. You wouldn't field a team with just half the players, right? You wouldn't go in the game and the other side has got 12 players and you decide, well, we'll just have 6. You'd want all the team, the entire team, to be available for you to win. And the same is true for the country.

I mean, you mentioned, for example, engineers. We have a shortage of engineers in this country. We need more. But the fact of the matter is, is that because of how we structure STEM education—that's science, technology, engineering, and math—the way we structure it, oftentimes, girls get discouraged early from going into those fields. And we know, actually, from experiments and data and what happens in the classroom, that some of it's just making little changes in terms of how things are taught so that girls feel more empowered and more engaged in those fields. They've got just as much talent as the boys do.

And that, unfortunately, is still true in a lot of our economy. There are certain things that we don't encourage our daughters to do. They start making choices because they don't see representation of themselves in certain fields.

Really interesting story: Somebody—my Chief Technology Officer, Megan Smith, who came over from Google, she told me that when "CSI" came on—now, I've got to admit, I don't watch that very often. I mean, I just don't watch—no offense to "CSI"—I just don't see it. It seems like a really popular show. But apparently, there was a woman—or women—who were involved in forensics in the show. A lot of the show is about finding hair fiber or something, and then you solve a big crime. And once this show came on, the number of young women going into the field skyrocketed. Because all it took was girls saying, oh, I didn't know I could be that. I didn't know I could do that.

So we as a society have to do better: public sector, private sector. We're putting a lot of emphasis on STEM education specifically for girls. The same is true, by the way, for underrepresented minority groups. African Americans, Latinos are underrepresented in these fields, and we've got to—and now, that requires us, collectively—parents, community, churches, others—encouraging people into these fields. Because these are the fields where we're going to be growing.

But some of it also has to do with companies have to want to make it happen. They've got to be intentional about it. They've got to pay attention to it. And those companies that pay attention to it end up succeeding in recruiting more women, promoting more women, and those companies end up being more successful.

And I'm trying to set an example in the White House right now. The highest level of adviser I have on the White House staff is called an Assistant to the President, and we actually have more women than men right now, I think 13 to 11. But that wasn't always the case, because when I first came in, we had to say, you know what, we've got to do better, and how do we make sure that we're promoting talent.

And it's true that companies can make a big difference. I'm going to give one example—two examples of how companies can make a difference, slightly different issue, but it shows the power companies have. When we started this minimum wage campaign, one of the places I went to was Costco, because not only did they pay their workers minimum wage, they paid them a living wage, and they provided them health care benefits. And they were a hugely profitable company, and we wanted to show that could be done. And then, suddenly, you had other companies like Gap announce that they were going to raise wages on their employees. And then, most recently, Walmart came in. And once Walmart is paying people more, then you know that something is happening, right? *[Laughter]*

So you can change attitudes and culture through a corporate example. On—one of the issues that's important to a lot of families is the issue of paid leave. There are 40-plus-million Americans who are working and don't have sick leave. They don't have sick leave. They get sick, there's nothing they can do. Either they go to work sick, or they lose their job, potentially, or at least they lose a paycheck. And family leave is still unpaid, so a lot of women can't take advantage of it if their child is sick at home.

Well, recently, Microsoft just announced that not only does it make sure that it has strong sick leave and paid leave, but it's actually only going to do business with contractors that do the same thing. So a big company like Microsoft then can start influencing some of their subcontractors and suppliers down the chain. That can end up having a huge impact.

So for companies that are brand names and set the standard, for them to show we're doing more to recruit women, promote women, put them in positions of authority, that sends a signal to our daughters, but it also sends a signal to other companies that it's the right thing to do.

## *Small Businesses*

*Ms. Stone.* Thank you, Mr. President. A number of the women and men here are small-business owners. And it would be very interesting to hear your thoughts on how we could encourage those businesses, how those businesses could get some of the support that doesn't exist.

So if there are, it sounds like, Federal policies from which a Microsoft and a Costco can benefit from, showing good faith towards its employees—I'm assuming I'm right, they benefited from creating those programs—what Small Business Administration-level programs are available to small-business men and women who actually don't have a safety net, don't have an HR department, and don't have an ability to call on a larger power?

*The President.* Well, it's important—the examples I used in terms of raising the minimum wage and in terms of paid sick leave, they didn't get a Federal benefit. They just thought it was smart business sense. Because what happens is, you get a lower turnover, higher productivity from your employees, greater employee satisfaction, and the company just ends up doing better.

For small businesses, sometimes, that's tougher. You've got smaller margins. You're trying to figure out how do I keep the doors open, how do I pay the bills. And really, our focus when it comes to small business has been to make sure, number one, that the Small Business Administration, the SBA, that people are taking advantage of it.

Because there are a lot of programs focused—the biggest problem a lot of small businesses have is in financing. And when I first came into office, small businesses were the ones that were getting hit the worst by the great recession. So we actually eliminated fees and made it easier for small businesses to get loans, and that helped a whole lot of small businesses get back on their feet. And we're continuing to try to expand outreach to let small businesses know how they can take advantage of financing through the SBA and to try to reduce the paperwork and the hassle that's involved in taking out a loan. That's hugely important.

We're also focusing specifically on women-owned businesses and how we can make sure that they are networked and able to access financing.

And then the Federal Government is a huge purchaser. We're just a big—we're the biggest customer in the world. We buy a lot of stuff. We buy everything. There's all kinds of stuff. At the Pentagon alone—*[laughter]*—I mean, you just think about, the Pentagon annual budget is well over \$500 billion. It's the largest organization on Earth, and that means it's got some purchasing power.

So part of what we've been doing is working with our—the heads of our agencies, saying, you've got to do more to make sure that opportunities are opened up. And a lot of times it's as simple as, for example, breaking up contracts so that they're in bite-sized pieces so that small businesses can take advantage of them. Because a lot of times, traditionally, what's happened is, they'll put out a contract for pencils, and it will be, like, 40 million pencils. And a small business can't bid on 40 million pencils, but if you say, well, why don't we chop this up so that small businesses can actually bid on it, that ends up making a big difference.

And through these—through the use of our purchasing power, our market power, we're trying to also encourage more women-owned businesses and minority-owned businesses to be able to just get their foot in the door and show what they can do.

Keep in mind, every big business started as a small business, right? And we want to make sure that we're continuing to innovate in our economy. That's how, ultimately, jobs get created.

*Ms. Stone.* Thank you, sir. Other questions?

Other questions? Yes, ma'am, in the red hat. Please.

### *Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act/Workplace Flexibility*

*Q.* Hi, Mr. President. My name is Jonette Harper, and I am the cofounder of Sarcoidosis of North Carolina. And I'm pretty sure you are familiar with sarcoidosis. There are a lot of people in our group, including myself, who started out life young, who thought everything was going to go their way.

*The President.* First of all, you're still young. But I just wanted to—[*laughter*].

*Q.* Thank you.

*The President.* All right. You sound like, geez—[*laughter*].

*Q.* No, I'm a proud 47-year-old woman.

*The President.* —the world has passed you by.

*Q.* Thank you very much. But there's a lot of other people in the group who had their lives ahead of them, wanted to do big things, and they got sick. Now, along with other diseases like—sarcoidosis is an invisible, chronic illness. A lot of companies can't tell by looking at someone when they're sick. So a lot of mothers, as well as fathers—because men get sarcoidosis also—but a lot of them are put aside or given jobs that they know that they can't—which they're forced out of the workforce. My question to you is, is there any, or will there be, any opportunity to give companies either tax credits or something that will encourage them to hire people with—who are on disability who—their families break up, their children worry about college because mom can't keep a job because she's always sick. Is there—can there be a way to encourage companies to—even though people may only be able to work 20 minutes—or 20 hours a week, excuse me, 20 hours a week, that might be the best 20 hours that that company gets.

*The President.* Well, first of all, let me just say that this is an example of why I've always felt like health care can't be a privilege, it's got to be a right in this country. And this is why we passed the Affordable Care Act, to make sure that we start building a health care system instead of a disease care system, that we start focusing on prevention, that we empower people to take care of their health better, get regular checkups, mammograms, all the things that we know can contribute to long-term health. And I'm very proud of the millions of people who are being helped. And it's working.

For all the criticism and all the political ups and downs and all the—me getting beat up about it, the fact of the matter is, is you've got more than 16 million people who got health insurance who didn't have it before. You've got health insurance—uninsured rates have gone down drastically. And by the way, the cost has been lower than anybody projected. Health care inflation has gone up at its slowest rate in 50 years. If the trajectory of health care inflation had kept on going up at the same pace as it was before the Affordable Care Act passed, even those of you who have health insurance—had health insurance and still have, you'd be paying \$1,800 more, on average, in premiums. You're saving that money, even though you don't know it. [*Laughter*] And you're protected from preexisting conditions. So if you lose your job you can always assure yourself that you're going to get health insurance coverage. Insurers can't

discriminate against you because you've got, for example, a chronic illness. So that's been very important.

Now, in terms of somebody who does have a chronic illness and they have disability, each case is going to be different. There are going to be—there are laws in place, the Americans with Disabilities Act—with Disabilities Act, that protects people who are officially disabled from being discriminated against. And employers have to find accommodations where possible.

But what we also need to do is to see if we can work with companies to identify some of these illnesses and get them educated, because sometimes, it's just misinformation in terms of them knowing what a person can or cannot do. And one of the trends that we want to encourage in companies is, because of the power of the Internet, people having a little more flex time can make a huge difference.

And that's particularly important for women, by the way, because no matter how enlightened your husband may pretend he is—[laughter]—women still oftentimes bear a disproportionate burden when it comes to childcare. And the more we're able to structure flexibility at the workplace, the better off women are going to be, the better off children are going to be, and ultimately, the better off everybody is going to be. That company is going to do better. And that obviously could have some application to somebody who has got a chronic illness, but otherwise, is very productive.

### *Citizenship/Political Engagement*

*Ms. Stone.* Thank you so much for that question. It really echoes a lot of what we hear from American women who are eager to work, dying to work, even when they are stuck at home for one reason or another. And I think that—I've got a great question from Theresa from Raleigh, the Importance of Being Reese. She's here. She's here somewhere. She said, what can we do as individuals to encourage involvement in gender and wage issues in our communities? We've talked about Government responsibility; we've talked about enterprise responsibility. What is the individual responsibility that we as Americans have to pursue these issues if they matter to us?

*The President.* Well, I've always said the most important office in a democracy is the office of citizen. And I was recently in Selma celebrating the 50th anniversary of the march there. World was transformed because maids and Pullman porters and young priests and rabbis and—just decided to march and to highlight issues. And so community participation is critical.

And look, I'm going to play the role of interviewer here for a second. Lisa, you tell me, the—when you—you've got this huge network that you guys have been able to set up. And that's part of the power of the Internet, is being able to make sure that people don't feel alone on these issues. They suddenly say, oh, what I'm reading here, that's what I'm going through.

Now, the key is, once you connect like that, with millions of people, how does that then translate into action in specific cities or specific communities? And I don't know the degree to which people have the opportunity through your site not only to share stories, but also to potentially act on them.

*Ms. Stone.* Well, thank you. When we started this company in 2005, we were trying to answer the question, where are the women who blog and use social media? And the question was easily answered. There were already millions of women doing it. So we pulled together a conference and had an opportunity for women to get together regularly online. Then,

Facebook was born. Twitter happened. People started connecting their blogs to community members who were interested in their voices across the board.

SheKnows Media today, I mean, we reach 82 million women every month on—across our sites and 165 million across social media. And that has everything to do with the power of the 20,000 experts in our community. Women are inspiring women every day. And it's very interesting to see the use of the hashtag and the use of social media to literally lean into what they care about.

*The President.* Right.

*Ms. Stone.* And we may lean in so hard that we fall over. [*Laughter*] But it doesn't mean that we aren't in there every day. So for example, the #Obamatownhall that we're working with today, we've had questions come in nationally and internationally for you and for each other about priorities. So it's interesting. For a long time, people wanted to make us a mommy blogger network when, in fact, parenting is just one of the many things I see American women caring enormously about. Thank you for asking.

*The President.* Absolutely. Good.

The—why don't we get a young person here? Who—this young lady right here. Yes—oh, see, now, you can't do that, now. [*Laughter*] What, you're trying to drop an assist over here. [*Laughter*]

*Ms. Stone.* This is the ladies basketball team.

*The President.* All right, what's the team?

Q. We're from Johnson and Wales University ladies basketball team.

*The President.* Okay. So this must be your point guard here.

Q. One of them.

*The President.* Yes, because she basically—she took the ball and—[*laughter*]. All right, go ahead.

### *College Affordability/Student Loans/Community Colleges*

Q. So being that we'll be graduating from a private college, it's known, it's a fact that we'll be—have a lot—we will have a lot of student loans. And my question to you is that, is there something that will be done to alleviate the bind that's going to be pushed on our backs after we graduate or that can help students that are economically inclined less—less economically inclined?

*The President.* Right. What year are you in school?

Q. I'm a junior.

*The President.* Okay. The—so how many juniors do we have? How many seniors? Freshmen? Seniors?

Q. So junior, junior, senior, junior—well, three juniors, and then, everyone else is freshmen.

*The President.* Okay. You've got a young team, that's good.

Q. It's our first year.

*The President.* First year, fantastic. The—well, this is something that—along with childcare, college and retirement, those are probably the three things that people feel so much pressure on. And sometimes, they feel pressure at the same time. We had so many student loans, Michelle and I, when we got married that paying back student loans was more than our mortgage at a time when we were already starting to try to save for Malia and Sasha's education. So families feel like, I don't know, even if I'm saving a little bit, what pot do I put it in?

And this is part of the reason why we expanded Pell grants so that we tried to get more grants, fewer loans. The way we did that, by the way, was when I came into office, banks were the pass-through for all student loan programs, and they were taking out a couple billion dollars every year. The thing was, the loans were federally guaranteed, so the banks really weren't taking any risk. And we said, well, why don't we just cut out the middleman, give the loans directly to the students, and then we can expand it for millions of students, which is exactly what we did. And we actually raised the level of Pell grants.

Second thing we did was capped the interest rate for students on student loans. The third thing we did, which I want a lot of people here to hear about because not as many people take advantage of it: We set up a program called income-based repayment that says, if you are graduating, you can make an arrangement whereby you never pay more than a certain percentage of your income, let's say, 10 percent of your income, which is especially important if you decide, for example, to go into teaching. And you've got to—you love teaching, but you have got all these loans. It makes sure that you can stretch out your loan payments longer, and that is helpful. But in the end, the most important thing we have got to do is actually just reduce the cost of higher education in general.

And that's why this proposal that we put forward for making the first 2 years of community college free is so important. It is one way that we can reduce costs. Because for a lot of young people, the community college may be their best option, either because they just need technical training to go then get a job, in which case, after 2 years, they go work with an associate's degree, and they have very little debt. Or even if they're going to a 4-year university, you can go for 2 years first and then transfer to get your 4-year degree, and you've just cut the amount of tuition and potential debt you've got in half.

Now, this is something that we've put forward; we're going to be continuing to push in Congress. There are other things we're doing, trying to pull together university presidents, community college presidents, and others to try to find other ways to reduce the overall cost of higher education.

So, for example, using more online learning, that could make a difference. Making sure that young people, when they come in, are counseled so that they graduate on time. Because a lot of times, debt increases because kids, they're supposed to graduate in 4 years; it takes them 6 because they started off the first 2 years taking classes that had no application to the things they were interested in, but nobody had told them.

Helping to educate young people on how student loans work and interest rates, "Know Before You Owe." [*Laughter*] Because, I will tell you, and I'll fess up, when I first got into college and I had these—I basically got through with grants and loans, and school was much less expensive for me, so I didn't have much debt undergraduate. But by the time I got to law school, once you were admitted, people just kind of said, well, you know, don't worry about it. And so you're kind of running around thinking, oh, I'm fine. And then, right before you get out, suddenly, they say, oh. [*Laughter*]

So what we've said to schools is no, no, no. Advise the young person before they enroll so that they can start planning ahead of time and, in some cases, maybe they don't spend quite as much money as they need to. Making textbooks cheaper. There are a whole bunch of things that we should be doing that reduces the cost of higher education. And we're working with colleges and universities to try to make that happen.

*Ms. Stone.* Thank you.

*The President.* Okay, I think, Lisa, I think this is our last question.

*Ms. Stone.* One last question. Shall we take one here in the front? Yes, ma'am.

### *Wage Equality*

*Q.* Let's see if I can get there. [*Laughter*] Thank you so much. Hello, Mr. President. My name is Ashley Taylor. I'm here from the blog the Dose of Reality. I'm also a registered nurse here in Charlotte at a clinic that is greatly benefiting from Obamacare, so we appreciate your work with that. I wanted to ask you, as the mother of two daughters, how would you suggest I best empower them to work hard, study hard, get a good education, if they know from the outset they're going to be paid less than their male counterparts for the same skill set with the same background?

And my second part of that question is, in addition to the Paycheck Fairness Act, is there something that you can do on a Federal level as far as executive action goes, should Congress continue to stall on this bill?

*The President.* Well, on the second part of your answer, we've probably exhausted what I can do through executive actions, because basically, what I can do is I can impact Federal contractors, but it's hard for me to go beyond Federal contractors. My executive actions don't apply automatically to the private sector who are not doing business with the Federal Government.

But I think what we need to do is just build a movement, build political pressure, educate people. Make sure that women know and husbands know that this is a family issue and an economic issue. And the thing is, if you asked anybody—I don't care if they're Democrat, Republican, Independent—if you ask them what's fair, they'd say, well, women should be paid the same as men. But it becomes somehow this political issue when this is not political. I mean, there are some areas that are tough where there really is differences of opinion in this country about issues, when it comes to issues like gun safety laws, for example. I mean, there are real passions on both sides, and sometimes, they're not completely reconcilable. But on this one, I guarantee you, the majority of Republicans, voters, they support equal pay for equal work. But when it gets to Congress, somehow, it becomes a political issue. We've got to stop that.

In terms of your daughters, the—look, you've got to remind your daughters that things aren't always perfectly fair, but people who are determined can make them fairer. America is not perfect, but it's a lot better than it was when my grandmother was trying to come up in that bank and hit that glass ceiling. Today, she would have probably gotten—been able to get a college education and would have been more likely to run that bank than she was 30 years ago.

So the way things get better is by that next generation taking ownership and being inspired and seeing their mom working a tough shift and then going out there and still rabble-rousing and—that's what we want. We want all these young people on the basketball team and young ladies who are in attendance here, we want them to feel like the world is wide open to you. You can be—remake this thing.



Ultimately, at some point, you guys are going to be in charge. And so we want to not send a message to them that somehow they're limited. We want to tell them what I tell Malia and Sasha, which is, there's nothing you can't do, because they're already smarter than me as well as better looking. *[Laughter]* Which is why I married Michelle, to improve my gene pool. *[Laughter]*

Listen, this has been great. Thank you, everybody.

*Ms. Stone.* Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you so much for joining us here.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:52 p.m. at *ImaginOn: The Joe & Joan Martin Center*. In his remarks, he referred to Dianna Jolly, supervisor, Child Care Resources, Inc.; Lilly Ledbetter, former employee, Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company plant in Gadsden, AL; former talk show host Phil Donahue; former Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr., of North Carolina; former President George W. Bush; and Warren E. Buffet, chief executive officer and chairman, Berkshire Hathaway Inc. He also referred to his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : SheKnows/BlogHer town hall meeting and question-and-answer session in Charlotte, NC.

*Locations:* Charlotte, NC.

*Names:* Adams, Alma; Buffet, Warren E.; Bush, George W.; Clinton, William J.; Clodfelter, Daniel G.; Donahue, Phil; Hunt, James B., Jr.; Jolly, Dianna; Ledbetter, Lilly; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Price, David E.; Smith, Megan; Soetoro-Ng, Maya; Stone, Lisa.

*Subjects:* Budget, Federal : Deficit and national debt; Business and industry : Small businesses :: Promotion efforts; Business and industry : Wage discrimination; Business and industry : Women-owned businesses ; Children and youth : Childcare, affordability and costs; Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Civil rights : Wage equality; Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Economy, national : Improvement; Education : Early childhood education programs; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Education : Postsecondary education :: Community colleges; Education : Postsecondary education :: Pell grants ; Education : Postsecondary education :: Student loans, interest rates and refinancing; Education : Postsecondary education :: Student loans, repayment options; Education : Science and math programs; Education : State support for local school districts, Federal assistance; Education : Teachers; Education : Technology and innovation, expansion efforts; Health and medical care : Health insurance reforms; Health and medical care : Health insurance, protection of coverage; Health and medical care : Insurance coverage and access to providers; Labor issues : Minimum wage; Labor issues : Paid family and sick leave; Labor issues : Workplace flexibility, improvement efforts; North Carolina : President's visits; SheKnows Media/BlogHer; Small Business Administration; Taxation : Child and dependent care expenses, tax credit; Taxation : Tax Code, reform; Taxation : Tax relief; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Chief Technology Officer.

*DCPD Number:* DCPD201500276.